

## The widening military-political gap in Israel: former chiefs of staff fight for principles of statism

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# SWP Comment

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## The Widening Military–political Gap in Israel

Former Chiefs of Staff Fight for Principles of Statism

*Yoram Peri*

Over the last decade, the gap between the military and political elites in Israel has increased and eventually peaked in 2019, when a group of senior officers who had just retired from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) formed a new party – led by three former chiefs of staff – and called for the replacement of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government. This gap has developed because Israel’s previous governments have represented a new kind of polarising, right-wing politics beyond what is considered a shared national common sense. The military, on the other hand, is striving to maintain the character it has acquired as a “Nation in Arms” by reflecting the entire society of Israel and acting according to its professional ethos and national statist values. The stated goal of the officers entering politics was to defend those values against perceivably partisan and polarising governmental politics. The composition of a future government is thus both: A competition over principled values of the state, but also a determination about the steps regarding the military and political leadership in Israel, as well as the military’s relations with society at large.

Israel is a parliamentary democracy with free elections and a multiparty system that leads to coalition governments, and the principle of military subordination to the political echelon has been anchored in the Basic Law: The Military (1976). As a result, the nature of Israel’s military–government relations has been obscured, and most observers do not fully appreciate the actual weight that the military wields in determining Israeli policies.

Even though Israel practices the “instrumentalist model”, meaning that the military executes policies set by the government,

another model coexists, namely that of “political–military partnership”, as the military has been a weighty partner in determining government policies even beyond the narrow field of security.

What has enabled the IDF to maintain its image as a national and non-political institution is the fact that it views itself as a professional body acting out of non-partisan considerations. Even the permanent professional military – and not only the conscripted units – continues to be a “citizens’ army” that reflects all shades of civilian society. Thus, the ethos of the IDF



is not one of militaristic professionalism. Rather, it represents very strongly the Israeli idea of *"Mamlachtiyut"* – a statist national ethos that combines notions of belonging to the same community, due conduct, inclusivity, and engaging for the common good of Israel.

Soldiers and officers come from all walks of life and represent the broad spectrum of political views prevailing in Israeli society. Yet, the leadership of the IDF was always a product of the political mainstream and never came from the more extreme margins of society, neither right nor left – embodying the very idea of *Mamlachtiyut*.

Although differences between the military and the political echelons have always occurred, we have seen a new quality of discrepancies between the IDF and its civilian superiors during the Netanyahu years. This is linked mainly to the fact that the policies of the respective Netanyahu governments in recent years have shifted Israel far to the right, and that the government disputes positions which have been guiding state policies and institutions for a long time.

This shift created a new political battlefield, especially with the "gatekeepers" of the principles of statism, such as the police, the judiciary, and especially the Supreme Court – but also the military. Concerning the IDF, this discrepancy sees two mutually reinforcing levels: What is professionally feasible from a military point of view, and what is politically feasible with regard to what is best for the State of Israel.

## Politicisation of Military Actions

One of the central political messages the right-wing governments tried to establish was that, at best, the political left does not understand security, or in the worst case, that they are helping Israel's enemies.

In addition, there has been a competition among right-wing groups about who is more "authentically" right-wing. That has set in motion a dynamic of radicalisation, which led the respective parties to present ever more hard-line security positions, such as

toppling the Hamas regime and achieving a "decisive victory" against Hizbullah. In other words, advocating a tough militaristic stance towards Israel's adversaries was, in recent years, a political strategy by which the political right hoped to gain votes within the right-wing electorate.

This created a strong politicisation of military actions and goals. As a result, it produced a growing dichotomy between positions the government was taking and evaluations of the IDF's general staff.

A series of events that took place in the last decade illustrates this gap between the government and the IDF leadership.

One of the latest and most remarkable events took place a few days before the September elections in 2019, when security leaders prevented Netanyahu from declaring the annexation of the West Bank and even stopped a major military operation in Gaza.

Another prominent example is when the heads of the defence establishment opposed an attack on Iran proposed by the political leaders. In 2010, the heads of the security establishment – Chief of Staff General Gabi Ashkenazi and Mossad chief Meir Dagan – literally prevented an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities as instructed by the prime minister and defence minister. These public servants went so far as to claim that such a directive – in the absence of the approval of the entire cabinet – would be unconstitutional. This situation repeated itself in 2011 and 2012 under Chief of Staff Benny Gantz and Mossad chief Tamir Pardo.

Another example is the different positioning of prominent ministers and politicians within the government and the IDF regarding policies vis-à-vis Hamas in Gaza, especially since 2015. In response to Hamas's missile and rocket attacks on Israeli civilians, Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, supported by other cabinet ministers, demanded a massive military campaign that was intended to lead to a full takeover of the Gaza Strip by the IDF's field units, the surrender of Hamas's military forces, and the collapse of the Hamas regime. Similarly, in 2019, Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz called for a re-conquering of Gaza to "defeat

Hamas". The military objected to those ideas, not only because it would result in many casualties — both to the IDF and to the civilian Palestinian population — but also because there was no permanent military solution for Gaza, as it had stressed time and again.

There are many more examples in recent years where — while right-wing politicians have called for a show of force — the army has called for moderation, emphasised the importance of diplomacy to restrain Palestinian violence, and, most recently at the beginning of 2020, called for work permits in order establish calm between Gaza and Israel.

## Growing Distance between the Army and the Government

The government's policies in the security field have led to harsh responses by military leaders. The latter fear losing the two pillars that have earned them a special status: Their strong position in dialogues with the government could be undermined, and they could also lose the confidence of large segments of the public, who might fear that the military will cease to be a non-political citizens' army. What has supported these perceptions is that the national religious movement (the engine behind the settlements project) has managed to infiltrate the centres of power in Israeli society — including the military — to a degree that far exceeds their relative representation within the population at large.

The IDF leadership is very concerned about the widening gap between the military and civilian society, so much so that, in the past decade, a number of chiefs of staff have declared that this rift poses a serious danger to the IDF, even more than the military threats of terror organisations or from Iran.

## Officers Parachute into Politics

The feeling that government officials and the military top brass do not broadcast on the same wavelength has led the latter to

organise politically and to participate in the April 2019 elections. Therefore, a substantial number of retired, very high-ranking officers joined ranks in order to defeat the government of Prime Minister Netanyahu. No wonder that the newly formed party Kahol Lavan ("Blue and White") — with Benny Gantz, Gabi Ashkenazi, and Moshe Ya'alon, three former IDF chiefs of staff — was called "the party of the generals".

As these officers had already left the army and became civilians, their involvement in the political game was legitimate; however, they reflected and represented the positions of their former colleagues in uniform.

Senior retired officers have participated in the highest ranks of government since the early days of the State of Israel. They benefit from the high public esteem for the military, with a current trust rate among Jewish Israelis of about 90 per cent, whereas the level of trust in political parties has fallen to 14 per cent. In the public perception, politicians are perceived as acting out of narrow personal motives and in the service of particular interest groups, whereas military officers are valued patriots who are acting for the sake of the nation, willing to risk their lives.

Yet, the country has never seen three former chiefs of staff in one party. They entered politics not only to work on the political — military relationship, but, as they continue to stress, to preserve the statist principles by which the state is governed. Thus, political — military relations are a core issue, but the party is presenting — or at least claims to present — their understanding of IDF values as a political guideline per se. Their core demands are to uphold the rule of law, end corruption, strengthen republican values, end partisan governments, create a national-unity coalition, and uphold principles of good governance.

They contrast it with the politics of Netanyahu's governments, which they deem sectarian, partisan, and focussed on religious and ethno-nationalist principles, rather than being orientated towards the professional and common good. Kahol Lavan party leader Benny Gantz described that

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difference with the catch phrase that he would stand for a “*Memshala Mamlachtit*” (statist government), whereas Netanyahu would head a “*Memshala Malchutit*”, meaning Netanyahu would govern Israel like a kingdom.

In those formulations, the shift that Israel has taken over the last years becomes visible. Whereas the principles of statism were previously widely shared among politicians, they have now become a bone of contention: As the Israeli Democracy Index in 2018 has shown, questions surrounding the principles of statism, the rule of law, and the state of Israel's democracy became, for the first time in its history, a major dividing line between left and right – and thus formed a new (and currently dominant) political cleavage in Israel. This is emphasised by the strong showing of the “party of the generals”, Kahol Lavan, in the two elections of 2019. With 35 and 33 seats (out of 120), respectively, they headed the strongest or second-strongest faction in the Knesset. In both elections, the newly formed party was clearly identified as the major competitor to Netanyahu's Likud, thus indicating a shift in the political landscape of Israel.

## Scenarios for Future Political–military Relations

The heightened involvement of retired officers in electoral politics in 2019 has already had a negative effect on political–military relations. Representatives of the right wing have attacked not only the retired-officers-turned-politicians, but also the military establishment itself. The IDF has been accused of being fearful of entering into battle, of not believing in the likelihood of reaching a victory in the battle with Hamas or Hizbullah, of refraining from carrying out a vigorous and aggressive

policy against the Palestinians, of nurturing defeatist tendencies, and of being infected with “leftism”.

Not a few representatives of this right-wing political circle have publicly recommended that a new nationalist government should initiate an overhaul of the IDF command, remove the upper echelon, and promote a young cadre of commanders. These would certainly be primarily composed of dedicated religious officers who were educated in the religious pre-military colleges and the national religious schools.

Such blatant identification between the IDF and one wing of the political map – together with the explicit call for political cleansing of the military leadership – was previously unheard of in Israel. Despite sharp differences between left and right, until now, all parties have always been careful to keep the military out of the political fray. In the second decade of the 21st century, the IDF has found itself at the centre of a national debate.

If the current trend of dominance of ethno-nationalist and religious politics continues, it is likely that we will see ever-growing criticism of the government against the IDF elite, as long as they do not comply with the government's view on security-related matters. It needs to be seen to what extent they can withstand the pressure. In any case, the likelihood of the preference for military solutions over political approaches in conflict scenarios will certainly rise.

On the other hand, a government that is not made up of purely right-wing parties will probably break these dynamics of self-radicalisation of the right wing's political demands. Especially if Kahol Lavan, the “party of the generals”, were to be in a governing coalition, the gap between the military and political leadership will be significantly smaller. Thus, much depends on the composition of the next government.

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